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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences between Arabs and Americans may cause misunderstandings when Arab students come to study in American universities. As part of the author's plan to write a guidebook for Arab students who are new to American university life, this paper presents preliminary analysis of differences in the two cultures. The author hopes her research will eliminate miscommunication and conflict by clarifying the differences in how the two cultures handle conflict, make apologies, and express anger and sympathy. Eight elements of cultural differences are explored: greetings and farewells; hospitality and food customs; speech styles; proxemics and gestures; male/female relationships; concepts of honor, shame, and morality; educational customs; and values of time, work, space, competition, and friendship. Restrictions on the behavior of women in Arab society are great; thus, Arab male students in America enjoy the sexual freedom of American women but do not want their own sisters or wives to adopt American manners. Most Americans do not know that, traditionally, Arabs must refuse food three times before accepting it. Also, Arab greetings tend to be very drawn out. An American's manner of speaking directly to the point can seem rude. Differences in inflection and voice emphasis convey different meanings in the two cultures. (AV)

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CULTURES IN CONFLICT: ARAB STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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OBJECTIVES

This research has two objectives. The first is to gather ethnographic information about the behavior, values, attitudes, and habits of students from the Middle East and to record their experiences as they come in contact with (and sometimes in conflict with) Americans and the American way of life.

The second objective is to apply this ethnographic data by writing a handbook for new Arab students and for organizations responsible for their orientation. By analyzing the sources of friction between Americans and Arabs, I hope to help the Arab students adjust more easily to their American surroundings and to avoid unnecessary conflict and culture shock. A number of students have expressed the opinion that this book would fill a need, and an Arab woman who teaches English as a foreign language has offered to translate it into Arabic so that it might be available to students before they come to the United States.

PRESENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE FIELD

The present state of knowledge in this field appears limited. Most ethnographies of the Middle East seem to have concentrated on peasant life, not on the highly educated elite who have studied and traveled abroad, and who consequently are articulate about the changes they are experiencing and the adjustments they have made to Western ways of thinking and behaving.

There seems to be very little literature explaining the Arab mind to Westerners, and I have found nothing that explains the American mind to Arabs.

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Edward T. Hall's comments on differences in space and time concepts are insightful, but I doubt that many Middle Easterners have had a chance to read Hall's books.

While there are studies of foreign student acculturation available, none seems to be particularly concerned with the problems of Arab students. Each college has housing services and foreign student organizations, but there doesn't seem to be any drawing together of information specifically for people from the Middle East.

GENERAL PLAN

I have chosen to study Arab students rather than Arabs in the business world because of the easier access to the subjects. Also, students are more likely to have been in the United States a shorter time, and therefore their experiences in adjusting to American life will be fresher in their minds than would the experiences of an established businessperson.

The research is being organized into approximately eight main categories;

1. greetings and farewells
2. hospitality and food customs
3. speech styles
4. proxemics and gestures
5. male/female relationships and family life
6. concepts of honor, shame, and morality
7. educational customs
8. values of time, work, space, competition, friendship, beauty, etc.

I chose these categories as areas of greatest contrast and the most concern to Arab students.

Some of the problems I have run into or will face in the future are:

1. Finding subjects. My first contact was through a professor, and that person was very helpful and generous with her time. I tried to make additional contacts throug the Organization of Arab Students at San Francisco State but felt rebuffed by the suspicion and coldness of the person I talked to. Another time I struck up a conversation with two men I thought were Arabs, and they were quite willing to talk to me. The only problem was, they bombarded me with political information about their country (Iran) and ignored my attempts to talk about what I was interested in! Then I ran an ad in the San Francisco State student newspaper, and a Jordanian man responded. I still meet with him on a regular basis and he has been interested in analyzing his own experiences and culture shock. The most helpful person of all has been a Syrian woman at a local English language institute who has set up a number of interviews for me with students from Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. I meet weekly with a young married Saudi woman and I feel we are beginning to be good friends.

2. Language limitations. I am studying Arabic but can barely say the greetings. Fortunately, most Arab students have studied English both at home and here in the States, and many of the ones I have interviewed have been quite articulate. However, it is easier to share facts than the nuances of feelings and attitudes in a foreign language, and some topics are really complex.

3. Finding a mutually agreeable time for interviews week after week was hard at first, but now I have two informants with whom I meet on a regular basis.

4. Indirect or untrue answers. I was advised that Arabs would give me equivocal answers or would be downright dishonest in an attempt to avoid self-disclosure. On the contrary, I feel my informants have been eager to

share their experiences and have had a sense of humor about some of the misunderstandings they went through.

5. Given the Arab attitudes about male-female relationships, I think it will be impossible for me to discuss anything remotely connected with sexual attitudes and beliefs with an Arab male. I was also warned not to ever meet with a man alone, since he would feel obligated to make a pass at me (even though I'm twenty years older than he!)

The biggest challenge is to translate situations for Arabs and Americans and to make different definitions of social situations comprehensible to each group. Certain practices point to larger cultural themes and assumptions. By making clear the assumptions of the other culture, I hope to show why their forms make sense when viewed from the right perspective.

I would like to discuss several of these categories very briefly and give some examples of the misunderstandings that may arise between Arabs and Americans because of their different world views and attitudes.

The first one is male/female relationships. As you can well imagine, this is an extremely complicated subject with attitudes that are so deeply ingrained in all cultures that analyzing them is very difficult. One problem is the contrast between male/female relationships in different subcultures in the Middle East. In Lebanon, some schools are co-educational, women can be active politically, and there are many other Western influences. In Syria and Jordan, clothes are Westernized and young women may have jobs outside the home, but a man and a woman walking down the street together may well be killed by the woman's relatives. In Saudi Arabia, as you are probably aware, a woman doesn't go out of the house or even into the presence of her male cousins without a chaperone and a veil. Underneath these restrictions

are basic assumptions of honor and shame, woman's enormous sexual appetite and inferior moral sense, and the belief that the attraction between men and women is so intense that it would be impossible for them to be alone together without succumbing to temptation. Hence women must be protected from any contact with men other than their fathers, brothers, uncles, or husbands. A woman's reputation is so fragile that she must constantly be on guard, and if she brings shame to her family, she may well be killed. (An interesting aspect to an American is that the disgrace is to her father's line, not to her husband's, in contrast to the Western view that an adulterous woman's chief crime is against her husband.) These restrictions are meant to preserve the family unit, which is extremely important in the Middle East as a source of security, help in time of need, economic survival, and social control. The honor of the family can be lost through a single act and may take generations to restore. A man's actions independent of a woman's actions may bring about loss of honor to the woman's family, even though she is completely innocent of any wrong-doing. Imagine the consternation, then, of a young Saudi woman whose American male teacher patted her on the shoulder for a job well done! To her this was an extremely intimate gesture coming from a stranger, and consequently very threatening to her sense of propriety and her husband's honor! The public hugging done by friends of the opposite sex in America must seem positively lewd.

Perhaps as the Middle East takes on Western concepts of industrialization and urbanization, a man's reputation will depend less on his wife and family and more on his career and organizational affiliations.

Most of the Arab male students I have met seem to be delighted with the freedom of our social relationships, and they enjoy the easy sex and available alcohol and drugs. I get the impression that this is a time to

let off steam and do all the things that will be forbidden when they return to their own countries. They definitely do not want Arab women to have the same freedom, and they are extremely protective of sisters and female cousins who are here. As much as they enjoy female company, the concept of a genuine friendship with a woman is incomprehensible to them. They are polite and attentive as escorts and an American girl friend will most likely feel cherished and important, but woe is she if she flirts with another man, teases her escort in front of others, or does anything to wound his pride. I know of one girl who was slapped by her boyfriend for playfully flicking ice at him across a restaurant table. Another girl was surprised to find that her friend was furious when she won a game of ping-pong with him. She also discovered that a comment about his attractive sister was not appreciated. Since one's family honor depends on the unsullied reputation of female relatives, any contact--even a verbal comment from another woman--may be taken as an insult. Calling someone a bastard or a son-of-a-bitch even in jest is unforgivable because of the slur to the person's mother, and I doubt that you could ever convince an Arab that in America these insults are directed, playfully or otherwise, only at the person addressed.

The category of honor, shame, and morality overlaps male/female relationships, of course. In a wider sense, Arab morality seems to be based on external restrictions and the shame that comes from someone finding out about your mistakes or sins. Behavior is calculated to impress others and to avoid exposing one's inner weaknesses. In contrast, Americans tend to use principles of rigid right and wrong (at least they pretend to), and children are taught to develop internal controls of behavior.

An example of the different attitudes is the way President Kennedy handled the Bay of Pigs incident as opposed to the way an Arab leader might have handled it. In the U.S., you can sometimes get yourself out of trouble by confessing your error early in the game--then others tend to think "What a honest fellow. He just made a human error and since he owned up to it, he is O.K." An Arab would feel that he has lost face by admitting the error, and would do everything possible to escape responsibility or minimize the damage. Nasser's diplomatic messages to King Hussain after the disastrous 1963 war are an amazing example of wishful thinking, revision of facts, face-saving denials, and rhetorical hoopla that actually was extremely misleading to the Jordanians.

A third category of the research is hospitality and food customs. It is a tradition in the Arab world to refuse food three times before accepting it. At American parties the host or hostess may never get around to offering food a second time or third time, and consequently the student from the Middle East may go hungry! Potlucks and buffets are a new experience, since the Arab woman as hostess is expected to prepare all the food. If you were from another country, would you worry about the ingredients in hot dogs? It may be hard to convince an Arab that they aren't really made of dog meat. On the other hand, to at least one Arab, chicken a la king sounded like a dish for Allah the King.

Arab students may think Americans are awfully casual about washing their hands before they eat, and for those who haven't been exposed to European ways, seeing Americans eat with their left hands may be truly shocking.

A fourth category is speech style. International tensions might be eased and business transacted more happily if both Americans and Arabs were more aware of the differences in their outlooks. For instance, eloquence and

rhetoric are highly appreciated in the Middle East. The American tendency to be brief and to the point sounds very abrupt and even hostile to the Arabs. Americans want to organize everything in a general framework before getting down to details. One of the problems with reconvening the Geneva Conference has been that Americans want to get everybody there and then work out the minor points. To the Arabs, those minor points are very important and can't be pushed to one side for later consideration.

Americans tend to say "Hello,how are you?" and then get immediately to another subject. Arabs like an extended and gracious greeting ritual and may run through elaborate phrases several times before getting down to business. References to God and flowery phrases are sprinkled throughout a conversation, which is sometimes disconcerting to practical, secular Americans who are used to a brief, logical, linear line of thought.

One way of asking a question in Arabic is to simply change the inflection at the end of the sentence without changing the word order. When an Arab says "You will get me a cup of coffee?" that is a polite request to him but it may sound like an order to an American who will feel offended by the presumption. I know of one young man from Lebanon who says he has lost two American girl friends because of his refusal to learn to say "Please." The girls tend to say "Get your own damn coffee" and stamp off. Masculine pride, coupled with an adamant refusal to change an Arabic way of speaking is making interpersonal problems for this man.

If you hear a group of Arab men discussing something, it may sound like they are all shouting angrily at once. Actually, loudness is a way of emphasizing a point and is not meant to express anger or hostility. In fact, lack of emphasis or exaggeration may lead others to think you mean the opposite of what you are saying, so an American may have to learn to say "No"

emphatically; otherwise it means "Yes" or "Maybe."

Part of studying Arabic speech styles will be finding out who talks to whom, when, where, and about what subjects, and which people, places, times, and subjects are taboo for different individuals.

METHODS

I am involved in on-going library research on the history and ethnography of the Middle East, problems of cross-cultural adjustment, culture shock, foreign student experiences in general, and American values.

I have formulated a series of open-ended interview questions which are changed and reevaluated with each interview.

As I thought more about the handbook, I realized that I needed to know more about American customs which I had always taken for granted. Perhaps my particular experiences as a Californian of my age and background do not qualify me to make generalizations about all American behavior, so I have added Emily Post to my reading list as well as articles in popular magazines about dope etiquette and other things your mother never taught you. I also want to take a closer look at American slang, in order to list some of the more likely-to-offend phrases. One of my Lebanese informants said she was quite confused when someone told her she was pulling his leg, and she was upset at being told to go jump in the lake (particularly since it was January in Boston!)

THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The most significant aspect of this study is the insight into taken-for-granted things in American culture as they are contrasted with situations in Arab culture. By studying interactional conflicts, I am discovering how a

different interpretation of a social situation can lead to miscommunication, conflict, and misinterpretation of intentions. Such things as discovering how conflicts are handled, apologies made, anger and sympath y expressed, will reveal much about American life as well, and in the end I will know more about myself and my own culture. I hope to make a contribution to ethnography, but I also aim to discover things that might be helpful to diplomats and businesspeople as well as to students. In a time of world-wide stress and potential war, anything t..at might contribute to understanding between people of various nations has some value. By getting to know Middle Easterns as individuals, with their own aspira:ions and fears, nobility and pettiness, beliefs and attitudes, I will learn more about both our differences and our common humanity.